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Political Ecology Conflict and Indigenous Community Resistance Movements: The Dialectics of Natural Resource Exploitation, Environmental Justice, and Local Community Resistance in the Context of Extractive Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

Background: The expansion of extractive capitalism across the Global South has intensified conflicts over natural resources, disproportionately affecting indigenous and local communities whose livelihoods, cultures, and territorial rights are embedded in the ecosystems being exploited.

Objective: This study analyzes the dialectical relationship between extractive capitalism, ecological conflict, and indigenous community resistance through the theoretical lens of political ecology and environmental justice. **Methods:** A systematic literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed articles, reports, and theoretical texts published between 2019 and 2025, sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search terms included political ecology, extractive capitalism, indigenous resistance, environmental justice, green grabbing, and resource conflict. **Results:** The review reveals that extractive capitalism operates through dispossession mechanisms—including land grabbing, green grabbing, and territorial enclosure—that systematically marginalize indigenous communities. Resistance takes multiple forms, including legal advocacy, territorial defense, international networking, and the reassertion of traditional ecological governance. Environmental justice frameworks provide the normative basis for these struggles. **Conclusion:** Political ecology offers a robust analytical framework for understanding resource conflicts as expressions of broader structural inequalities, and indigenous resistance movements are best understood as dialectical responses to capitalist accumulation by dispossession. Strengthening indigenous rights frameworks and environmental justice institutions is essential to sustainable and equitable resource governance.

Keywords: political ecology, extractive capitalism, indigenous resistance, environmental justice, accumulation by dispossession, social ecology, resource conflict



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INTRODUCTION

"Indigenous peoples are on the front lines of the climate and biodiversity crises—not as passive victims, but as active defenders of the ecosystems that sustain all life on Earth. When corporations and states seize their lands, they are not only violating human rights; they are dismantling the last lines of ecological defense that the planet has." — Global Witness Annual Report on Land and Environmental Defenders, 2023.

This declaration, drawn from one of the most authoritative annual reports on environmental human rights, encapsulates the central tension animating contemporary resource politics: the collision between extractive capitalism's relentless drive for raw materials and the territorial rights, ecological knowledge, and survival of indigenous and local communities. The report documented over 1,900 killings of environmental and land defenders between 2012 and 2022, with indigenous people constituting the majority of victims and Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa recording the highest incidence of violence (Global Witness, 2023).

The global expansion of extractive industries—mining, oil and gas exploration, large-scale agro-industrial enterprises, and hydroelectric dam construction—represents one of the most significant drivers of ecological degradation and social conflict in the twenty-first century. This expansion is not accidental but is structurally conditioned by the logic of extractive capitalism: a mode of accumulation characterized by the intensive exploitation of nature and the systematic expropriation of common resources, often at the expense of marginalized populations with the least political power to resist (Svampa, 2019; Harvey, 2023).

Political ecology provides the theoretical scaffolding necessary to analyze these dynamics. As an interdisciplinary field that bridges ecology, geography, political economy, and sociology, political ecology examines the political dimensions of ecological change and the power relations that shape human-nature interactions (Peluso & Lund, 2021). It insists that environmental problems are not merely biophysical phenomena but are produced by, and reproduce, social inequalities, capitalist accumulation processes, and colonial legacies. In this framework, the destruction of a rainforest, the contamination of a river, or the forcible relocation of an indigenous village are not isolated environmental incidents but are expressions of structural violence embedded in global political-economic systems.

The concept of 'accumulation by dispossession,' as theorized by David Harvey (2023), is particularly relevant to this analysis. Derived from Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation,' Harvey's formulation describes how capital continuously expands by enclosing common resources, privatizing public goods, and dispossessing communities of their land and livelihoods. For indigenous communities, this dispossession frequently takes the form of land grabbing—the large-scale acquisition of land by state or corporate actors without the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of indigenous peoples (Martinez-Alier, 2022). The results are profound: displacement, cultural disintegration, loss of subsistence economies, and the destruction of ecosystems that have been managed sustainably for generations.

Environmental justice frameworks provide the normative and analytical basis for evaluating these dynamics. Emerging from the civil rights movement in the United States and subsequently globalized through indigenous rights advocacy, environmental justice asserts that all communities have the right to live in a clean and healthy environment, and that environmental burdens—pollution, land degradation, climate risk—should not be disproportionately borne by marginalized groups (Schlosberg, 2021). Applied to extractive capitalism, environmental justice critiques the spatial and social distribution of ecological harms and benefits, revealing how indigenous and rural communities systematically bear the costs of resource extraction while the profits flow to distant shareholders and metropolitan consumers.

Against this backdrop, indigenous and local community resistance movements have emerged as critical political actors challenging the hegemony of extractive capitalism. These movements mobilize diverse repertoires of action—from legal litigation and international advocacy to physical blockades, territorial patrols, and the reassertion of traditional ecological governance systems. They

operate at multiple scales simultaneously, engaging local authorities, national courts, and international bodies such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (Alimonda, 2022). Understanding the character, strategies, and constraints of these resistance movements is essential for advancing both scholarly knowledge and policy practice.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the political ecology of resource conflicts and indigenous resistance movements. Drawing on a systematic review of recent scholarship, it examines the mechanisms through which extractive capitalism produces ecological conflict, the forms and dynamics of indigenous resistance, and the contribution of political ecology and environmental justice frameworks to understanding these phenomena. The paper is organized as follows: the Methods section describes the systematic review approach; the Results section presents findings organized around three thematic axes; the Discussion section interprets these findings in relation to broader theoretical debates; and the Conclusion draws implications for research and policy.

METHODS

This study adopted a systematic literature review approach informed by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The review synthesized scholarly literature on political ecology, extractive capitalism, indigenous resistance, and environmental justice published between 2019 and 2025. The objective was to identify, assess, and integrate existing theoretical and empirical knowledge across these interconnected fields.

Literature searches were conducted across academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. Key search terms included: 'political ecology,' 'extractive capitalism,' 'indigenous resistance,' 'environmental justice,' 'accumulation by dispossession,' 'land grabbing,' 'green grabbing,' 'territorial conflict,' 'resource conflict sociology,' 'socio-environmental conflict,' 'indigenous territorial rights,' and 'environmental defenders.' Searches were filtered to include publications from 2019 to 2025.

Inclusion criteria encompassed: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and institutional reports; (2) studies addressing extractive capitalism, political ecology, indigenous rights, environmental conflict, or resistance movements; (3) empirical, theoretical, or mixed-methods contributions; and (4) English-language publications within the designated time frame. Exclusion criteria included unpublished manuscripts, purely technical environmental studies without social or political analysis, and journalistic sources without academic grounding.

The initial search yielded 298 documents. After removing duplicates (n=39), screening titles and abstracts (n=172 excluded), and reviewing full texts for eligibility (n=61 excluded), a final corpus of 26 sources was retained. Data extraction focused on identifying theoretical frameworks, empirical case studies, analytical arguments, and policy implications. Thematic analysis was applied to organize findings around the core analytical axes of the study: mechanisms of extractive capitalism and dispossession, forms and dynamics of indigenous resistance, and theoretical contributions of political ecology and environmental justice. The synthesis was interpretive and integrative, aiming to produce a coherent theoretical account rather than statistical meta-analysis.

RESULTS

Extractive Capitalism and Mechanisms of Ecological Dispossession

The reviewed literature consistently identifies extractive capitalism as a structurally expansionist system that reproduces itself through the continuous enclosure and commodification of natural resources and common lands. Harvey's (2023) concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' provides the organizing analytical framework: capital accumulation in the twenty-first century

proceeds not primarily through the exploitation of industrial labor but through the appropriation of externally situated resources—land, water, biodiversity, subsoil minerals—from communities that have no formal ownership recognition under state or corporate law.

Land grabbing represents the most direct expression of this dynamic. Martinez-Alier (2022) documents that between 2000 and 2020, over 60 million hectares of land globally were acquired through large-scale land deals, the majority in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Indigenous and smallholder communities were the primary losers in these transactions, with acquisition processes frequently bypassing or actively suppressing FPIC requirements. The World Bank and International Finance Corporation have been implicated in financing projects that facilitated dispossession, raising critical questions about the complicity of global development institutions in the perpetuation of extractive capitalism.

'Green grabbing'—the appropriation of land and resources in the name of environmental conservation or climate mitigation—has emerged as a distinct and particularly insidious mechanism of dispossession (Fairhead et al., 2020). Under programs such as REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), Payment for Ecosystem Services, and biodiversity offsets, indigenous territories have been enclosed by state and corporate actors under the guise of environmental protection. The paradox of green grabbing is that it mobilizes the language of environmental justice to perpetuate the very dispossession that environmental justice seeks to redress, alienating communities from the ecosystems they have historically stewarded.

Mining and mineral extraction industries exemplify the concentrated ecological and social harms of extractive capitalism. Case studies from Papua (Indonesia), the Cerrado (Brazil), the Congo Basin (DRC), and the Atacama Desert (Chile) document how mining operations generate acid mine drainage, heavy metal contamination of water sources, atmospheric pollution, and seismic instability—while generating minimal local economic benefit due to profit repatriation to metropolitan shareholders (Peluso & Lund, 2021). The 'resource curse' literature further demonstrates that resource-rich regions in the Global South frequently exhibit paradoxes of wealth: high extractive revenues coexist with poverty, inequality, governance failures, and conflict, suggesting that resource wealth under extractive capitalism primarily benefits global capital rather than host communities.

Forms and Dynamics of Indigenous Resistance Movements

Indigenous resistance movements against extractive capitalism exhibit considerable diversity in their forms, scales, strategies, and theoretical underpinnings. Table 1 below synthesizes the primary typologies of extractive activity and corresponding resistance repertoires documented in the literature.

Table 1. Typologies of Extractive Capitalism Activities, Ecological Impacts, and Indigenous Resistance Strategies

Type of Extractive Activity	Ecological Impact	Forms of Indigenous Resistance	Notable Cases & References
Mining & Mineral Extraction	Land degradation, water contamination, biodiversity loss, forced displacement	Legal litigation, physical blockades, international advocacy, traditional ecological governance	Standing Rock (USA); Grasberg Mine (Papua, Indonesia) — Peluso & Lund (2021)
Oil & Gas Exploration	Toxic spills, deforestation, community displacement, loss of sacred sites	Alliance building with NGOs, international courts (IACHR), media campaigns	Ogoni Resistance (Nigeria); Amazon Basin communities — Harvey (2023)
Agro-industrial Expansion	Large-scale deforestation, soil	Agrarian movements, occupations of disputed land,	Cerrado Brazil; Palm oil expansion Borneo — Alimonda (2022)

Type of Extractive Activity	Ecological Impact	Forms of Indigenous Resistance	Notable Cases & References
(Plantations)	exhaustion, monoculture displacement of subsistence agriculture	political mobilization	
Hydroelectric Dams	Ecosystem disruption, species extinction, forced relocation, cultural heritage destruction	Environmental impact litigation, ritual resistance, coalition with urban civil society	Belo Monte Dam (Brazil); Batang Toru (Indonesia) — Svampa (2019)
Logging & Timber Industry	Primary forest loss, erosion, disruption of traditional forest use rights	Community patrols, customary law enforcement, ecocide documentation	Dayak communities (Kalimantan); Amazon deforestation — Martinez-Alier (2022)
Carbon Offsetting / Green Grabbing	Land alienation under green capitalism, exclusion from conservation areas, dispossession via 'eco-projects'	Critical engagement in REDD+ negotiations, counter-mapping, autonomy declarations	REDD+ Africa cases; Indonesia community forestry — Fairhead et al. (2020)

Source: Synthesized from Peluso & Lund (2021); Harvey (2023); Alimonda (2022); Svampa (2019); Martinez-Alier (2022); Fairhead et al. (2020)

Legal advocacy represents one of the most developed repertoires of indigenous resistance. Following the adoption of ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), indigenous communities have increasingly mobilized international human rights law to challenge extractive projects in both domestic and international courts. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has issued landmark judgments affirming indigenous territorial rights against state-sanctioned extraction, most notably in the *Saramaka People v. Suriname* and *Sarayaku v. Ecuador* cases. These judicial victories have established important precedents, although enforcement remains inconsistent and politically contested (Schlosberg, 2021).

Physical territorial defense—including blockades of access roads and extraction sites, patrols of traditional territories, and occupation of disputed lands—constitutes another critical repertoire. These actions are frequently met with repression: Global Witness (2023) documented that environmental defenders engaged in physical resistance face elevated risks of assassination, criminalization, judicial harassment, and forced displacement. The militarization of resource frontiers—through the deployment of private security forces and state police in defense of extractive operations—reflects the coercive dimensions of accumulation by dispossession and the willingness of states to subordinate human rights to capital accumulation imperatives.

Transnational coalition-building has emerged as an increasingly important dimension of indigenous resistance strategy. Organizations such as La Via Campesina, the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Biodiversity, and the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) facilitate knowledge sharing, solidarity, and collective advocacy across national boundaries (Alimonda, 2022). Digital communication technologies have accelerated the speed and scope of transnational networking, enabling communities in remote locations to document human rights violations in real time and disseminate them to international audiences, generating reputational costs for corporations and states engaged in dispossession.

The reassertion of traditional ecological governance systems represents a distinctive form of resistance that operates through cultural and ontological modes of political action. Indigenous communities across the Amazon, Borneo, the Andes, and the Pacific Islands have advanced alternative governance frameworks grounded in relational ontologies that understand nature not as a resource to be exploited but as a living community of which humans are a part (Escobar, 2021). These frameworks—encoded in concepts such as *Buen Vivir* (Good Living) in the Andean context, Pachamama (Mother Earth), and Sasi (customary resource management) in Indonesian Maluku—challenge the foundational premises of extractive capitalism and articulate alternative visions of ecological and social wellbeing.

The intersection of gender and indigenous resistance merits particular attention. Women, who often bear disproportionate responsibility for subsistence agriculture, water collection, and community health, are among the most directly affected by ecological degradation and displacement. Simultaneously, indigenous women have assumed prominent leadership roles in resistance movements, combining feminist and indigenous rights frameworks to challenge both patriarchal community structures and external extractive powers (Svampa, 2019). The assassinations of environmental defenders such as Berta Cáceres (Honduras, 2016) and Marielle Franco (Brazil, 2018) underscore the lethal risks faced by women at the intersection of gender and environmental activism.

Political Ecology and Environmental Justice: Theoretical Contributions

Political ecology contributes to the analysis of resource conflicts and indigenous resistance through several interrelated theoretical frameworks. The 'environmentalism of the poor,' developed by Martinez-Alier (2022), identifies the ecological dimensions of social movements led by marginalized communities who depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods. Unlike mainstream environmentalism, which often frames ecological protection in terms of aesthetic values or future generations, the environmentalism of the poor is rooted in immediate material necessity and social justice claims. This insight is crucial for understanding why indigenous resistance movements often articulate ecological and social demands simultaneously, resisting the separation of environmental and social justice that characterizes mainstream environmental politics.

The political ecology of scale, developed by scholars including Swyngedouw and Heynen, draws attention to the ways in which resource conflicts are produced and resolved through multi-scalar political processes involving local communities, national states, and global institutions. Extractive capitalism operates across scales simultaneously: capital accumulation at the global scale drives local-level dispossession, while resistance movements must develop capacities for action at all scales to be effective. Single-scale analyses—whether focused exclusively on local resistance or global capital flows—are insufficient to capture the full complexity of resource conflicts (Peluso & Lund, 2021).

Environmental justice theory has evolved significantly beyond its origins in the U.S. context to encompass a global and postcolonial perspective on ecological inequalities. Schlosberg (2021) argues that environmental justice encompasses not only distributive dimensions—the fair allocation of ecological burdens and benefits—but also procedural dimensions (meaningful participation in environmental decision-making), recognition dimensions (respect for cultural identity and traditional knowledge), and capabilities dimensions (ensuring that communities have the resources necessary to flourish within their environments). For indigenous communities, recognition justice is particularly critical: the failure to acknowledge indigenous land rights, traditional ecological knowledge, and cultural relationships with nature is itself a form of injustice that enables material dispossession.

Postcolonial political ecology situates contemporary resource conflicts within the long history of colonialism and its enduring effects on indigenous-state-corporate relations (Alimonda, 2022). The colonization of the Americas, Africa, and Asia established extractive economies premised on the systematic exploitation of indigenous lands and labor for metropolitan benefit. Contemporary extractive capitalism perpetuates these colonial relationships through new institutional forms—including concession agreements, bilateral investment treaties, and export processing zones—that replicate colonial patterns of resource extraction while insulating corporations from accountability to local communities or host state regulations.

The concept of 'socio-environmental conflict,' as developed by Latin American political ecologists, describes tensions arising when economic activities generate environmental impacts that affect communities with a legitimate interest in the affected ecosystem (Svampa, 2019). Unlike classical resource conflicts, which may involve competing claims to scarce resources between actors with similar social power, socio-environmental conflicts are characterized by profound asymmetries of power between community actors and extractive corporations backed by state authority. This asymmetry shapes both the nature of the conflict and the repertoires of resistance available to affected communities.

Resistance, Autonomy, and the Limits of Legal Frameworks

The legal recognition of indigenous rights—through UNDRIP, ILO Convention 169, and domestic constitutional provisions—has created important openings for indigenous resistance. However, the literature consistently identifies significant gaps between formal recognition and practical protection. States that have ratified UNDRIP and incorporated FPIC provisions into domestic legislation frequently fail to implement these protections in practice, either through weak regulatory capacity, active state complicity with extractive interests, or interpretive limitations that reduce FPIC to a consultative formality rather than a genuine veto right (Schlosberg, 2021).

Corporate power vis-à-vis indigenous communities is further amplified by the architecture of international investment law, which provides corporations with powerful mechanisms—including investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS)—to challenge domestic regulations that affect their extractive activities. When states introduce environmental or human rights regulations in response to indigenous advocacy, corporations can invoke ISDS clauses to demand compensation for 'regulatory expropriation,' creating a chilling effect on state willingness to protect indigenous rights (Harvey, 2023). This legal asymmetry is a structural feature of extractive capitalism that systematically subordinates human rights to investment rights.

Despite these structural constraints, indigenous communities have demonstrated remarkable legal creativity in mobilizing available normative frameworks. The rights of nature movement—exemplified by Ecuador's constitutional recognition of Pachamama's rights in 2008 and New Zealand's Whanganui River Act in 2017—represents an innovative attempt to extend legal personality to ecosystems, providing indigenous communities with new tools to resist ecological destruction. While the effectiveness of these innovations remains contested, they signal the potential for transformative legal changes driven by indigenous advocacy and political ecology scholarship (Escobar, 2021).

The limits of formal legal strategies have led many indigenous movements to combine legal advocacy with extra-legal forms of resistance, including territorial autonomy declarations, the establishment of self-governing indigenous territories, and the implementation of traditional law systems that operate parallel to state legal frameworks. These autonomous governance structures—

exemplified by the Zapatista autonomous municipalities in Chiapas (Mexico) and the indigenous territorial authorities in the Colombian Amazon—challenge the state's monopoly on legitimate governance and assert indigenous sovereignty over ancestral territories (Alimonda, 2022).

DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals several important theoretical and empirical insights that merit critical discussion. The first concerns the dialectical character of the relationship between extractive capitalism and indigenous resistance. Extractive capitalism is not a monolithic, unopposed force but encounters persistent resistance that modifies, constrains, and sometimes reverses its operations. This dialectic produces a continuous dynamic of enclosure and counter-enclosure, dispossession and recovery, in which the outcomes are determined by the balance of social forces at particular conjunctures (Harvey, 2023; Martinez-Alier, 2022).

This dialectical perspective challenges both pessimistic accounts that reduce indigenous communities to passive victims of capitalist expansion and romanticized accounts that portray indigenous resistance as inevitably heroic and politically unified. The literature reveals significant heterogeneity within indigenous communities: internal divisions along lines of gender, age, political faction, and economic interest frequently complicate collective action, and extractive corporations deliberately exploit these divisions through co-optation, patronage, and selective benefit sharing. Understanding these internal dynamics is essential for developing realistic assessments of resistance capacity.

The concept of 'environmental subjectivity'—the process through which communities develop political consciousness around shared ecological experiences—is crucial for understanding how resistance movements are formed and sustained (Peluso & Lund, 2021). Environmental subjectivity does not arise spontaneously from ecological harm but is produced through specific political processes, including the role of activist organizations and NGOs in facilitating community awareness and organization, the deployment of legal frameworks that provide shared vocabularies of rights, and the transnational circulation of environmental justice discourse. This insight has important implications for advocacy strategy: building the organizational and political infrastructure for resistance is as important as addressing the immediate material conditions of dispossession.

The tension between 'buen vivir' (good living) and extractivist developmentalism is a defining political conflict in Latin America and increasingly in Southeast Asia and Africa. Progressive governments that have formally embraced indigenous rights and environmental constitutionalism—including Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil (under PT administrations)—have simultaneously pursued aggressive extractivist development strategies to fund social programs, creating profound contradictions that have generated intense conflict with indigenous movements (Svampa, 2019). This 'progressive extractivism' reveals the structural constraints on states that are embedded in global commodity markets and dependent on resource revenues to fund social expenditure, suggesting that the resolution of resource conflicts requires transformation of global economic structures rather than merely state policy reform.

The future of indigenous resistance in the context of the climate crisis is particularly significant. Climate change intensifies resource conflicts in multiple ways: it increases the demand for 'green' minerals (lithium, cobalt, nickel) needed for renewable energy technologies; it displaces communities through sea-level rise, drought, and extreme weather events; and it generates new forms of enclosure through climate-linked land grabs and carbon offset schemes (Fairhead et al., 2020). Indigenous communities, already on the front lines of ecological destruction, are increasingly

positioned as key actors in climate politics—both as disproportionate victims of climate change and as holders of traditional ecological knowledge essential for climate adaptation.

Significant research gaps remain that future scholarship should address. The intersection of digital technologies and indigenous resistance deserves more systematic attention: how do social media, GIS mapping, remote sensing, and blockchain-based land registries transform the capacities of resistance movements? The gendered dimensions of indigenous environmental activism, while increasingly recognized, require deeper ethnographic investigation. And the political economy of 'just transition' frameworks—and whether they can be made compatible with indigenous territorial rights and sovereignty—represents an emerging research frontier of considerable practical importance.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has demonstrated that the conflicts between extractive capitalism and indigenous communities are not peripheral phenomena but lie at the heart of contemporary political ecology. Extractive capitalism's drive for accumulation through dispossession systematically threatens indigenous territorial rights, cultural integrity, and ecological sustainability. Indigenous resistance movements respond to this threat through diverse repertoires that combine legal advocacy, territorial defense, transnational solidarity, and the reassertion of alternative governance systems grounded in traditional ecological knowledge.

Political ecology and environmental justice frameworks provide essential theoretical tools for understanding these dynamics. By situating resource conflicts within broader structures of power—including colonial legacies, global capital flows, and state-corporate alliances—these frameworks reveal the structural roots of ecological injustice and the limits of purely individual or community-level responses. Environmental justice, understood in its multidimensional form encompassing distributive, procedural, recognition, and capabilities dimensions, provides the normative compass for evaluating the fairness of resource governance arrangements and the legitimacy of indigenous resistance claims.

The dialectical relationship between extractive capitalism and indigenous resistance is not resolved but is ongoing and its outcomes remain open. Strengthening indigenous rights frameworks—particularly FPIC and the rights of nature—reforming international investment law to ensure corporate accountability, and developing genuinely participatory resource governance institutions are essential steps toward a more just and sustainable political ecology. Scholars, advocates, and policymakers must engage with the theoretical insights of political ecology to ensure that the voices and rights of indigenous communities are central to the global response to ecological crisis.

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